

RAH! RAH! GO, STAFF MORALE! : WHAT WE CAN LEARN FROM FLYING FISH & CONTENTED COWS

by Sarah Woodruff



INTRODUCTION

The image of a public library has changed over time, with the public now expecting the latest DVDs to be available, along with accessible computers and varied and innovative programming. With so many changes in what the public expects, our sense of morale and “being” may also change.

According to the *Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* (1999), the word morale means “the mental and emotional condition (as of enthusiasm, confidence, or loyalty) of an individual or group with regard to the function or the tasks at hand” (p.756). The second meaning it lists is “a sense of common purpose with respect to a group” (p. 756). The third definition for morale is “the level of individual psychological well-being on such factors as a sense of purpose and confidence in the future” (p. 756). As a librarian, when I look at the definition of morale I see two words—*common purpose*. In the midst of library changes, how do we boost our morale? How can we keep up our spirits and sustain our common purpose?

THE BIG GAME STARTS ON MONDAY

I see morale as a team effort. To further this analogy, let's view a normal workday at the library as the “big game day.” The big game starts every Monday, which may seem like a “let down” from the weekend. If anyone has seen the movie *Office Space* this one line sums up the typical Monday doldrums when a co-worker says, “Uh-oh, sounds like somebody's got a case of the Mondays” (Rotenberg & Judge, 1999). Some Mondays I don't feel like a team player, and if anyone were to ask me where my librarian jersey was, I would admit that it was in my closet, crumpled up in a pile under some dirty laundry. A definite sign of bad morale is when the case of the “Mondays” stays with us the rest of the week. That is when we lose our common purpose, our vision. What can we do to boost morale?

WHEN FISH FLY: WHAT OTHERS SAY ABOUT KEEPING OUR VISION

John Yokoyama (2004), owner of Seattle's world famous Pike Place Fish Market and co-author of the

book *When Fish Fly: Lessons for Creating a Vital and Energized Workplace*, says, “Our vision is our daily work life! If you aren't willing to consistently make a world famous difference then our job is not for you” (Yokoyama & Mitchell, p.18). Librarians need to make a “world famous difference” in our jobs, too. We provide vital services to the public by offering reference service and access to both print and media materials. We also provide service through children, teen, and adult programming. Yokoyama says our vision is our daily work life. Yokoyama's idea of making a “world famous difference” can carry on to the library.

By making a difference, we can boost morale if the community is happy with our service and we can feel better and more appreciated. The great thing about a library is that the institution itself is very optimistic and does make a big difference in any community.

OUR FEARLESS LEADERS: WHAT MANAGERS CAN DO TO KEEP OUR VISION AND MORALE

In his book, Yokoyama (2004) spends a great deal of time on the subject of management. He believes that one of the keys to keeping a workplace spirited and energized is by rethinking the attitude of managers. Yokoyama realizes the importance of stepping back as a leader and being open to the suggestions and the knowledge of his employees. In his book he states, “Once I understood the creative power of people and the importance of offering a place where they could make a difference, Pike Place Fish began to take off” (Yokoyama & Mitchell, p.8). A manager showing interest in the suggestions and ideas of employees does bolster morale. I like to call this “passing the ball” or “passing the fish.” Although managers are the ones who ultimately have to make the final decisions, some of the best managers that I have worked for consider every staff member's suggestion, no matter what his or her position is on staff. We have creative, intelligent, and passionate people that work for public libraries and their opinions and suggestions should be considered. The great thing about allowing creative input and suggestions is that staff members feel a sense of ownership and pride in where they work. This sense of

ownership and pride fosters a more positive environment which boosts morale.

KEEPING A POSITIVE WORK ENVIRONMENT MEANS HAVING A WINNING TEAM

In the book *Contented Cows Give Better Milk*, authors Bill Catlette and Richard Hadden (1998) point out that employees like to be appreciated. They mention how Tommy Lasorda, former manager of the Los Angeles Dodgers, showed his appreciation. Lasorda said,

I want my players to know that I appreciate what they do for me. I want them to know that I depend on them. When you, as a leader of people, are naïve enough to think that you, not your players won the game, then you're in bad shape. (Catlette & Hadden, p.86)

It is important that employees know the library depends on them and that their work is valued.

KEEPING THINGS INTERESTING: THE SPICE OF LIFE IS A MORALE BOOSTER

According to Anne Bruce's (2003) book, *Building a High Morale Workplace*, variety and responsibility are two great ways to keep staff interested in their work. Bruce suggests that whenever possible keep jobs multi-task- and multi-talent-driven. She suggests rotating duties so staff members can have a variety of tasks. As a former clerk I always liked rotating duties, whether it was to keep track of library card records or updating the periodicals area with current magazines and newspapers. Few people like to do the same things every day, and one of the assets of working at a library is that a variety of tasks need to be done. As a children's librarian, I have found that rotating who is in charge of the different system-wide programs helps facilitate creativity. By the same token, taking on responsibility for a book collection or a program gives staff ownership and makes them feel more valued. Encouraging creativity and promoting feelings of ownership are also significant ways to boost morale.

PLEASE SWEAT THE "SMALL STUFF": IT REALLY IS THE LITTLE THINGS THAT MATTER

The book *Contented Cows Give Better Milk* (Catlette & Hadden, 1998) emphasizes the importance of managers being flexible with staff scheduling. Since most libraries are open seven days a week, and staff members do have lives outside of the library, it really helps when managers try to accommodate schedule preferences. Being flexible makes workers feel that management understands that personal time is important.

The book also mentions that knowing and recognizing staff members' birthdays and work anniversaries makes them feel more valued. Random acts of kindness, such as bringing in doughnuts on a Monday morning, can also improve morale. We have one worker at our library who keeps a little dish of chocolates at her desk for staff to enjoy, and everyone knows chocolate can help with morale!

TEAM TRAINING: THE IMPORTANCE OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Another great morale booster is to attend professional development meetings. Not only does this bring you into contact with others in the field, it gives you a chance to learn from them. It is beneficial to know what is going on at other libraries and how others are managing change and new technology. Professional development meetings can also make you feel more motivated and excited about your work and can get your creative juices flowing.

Another great morale booster is to join a professional organization such as the Indiana Library Federation. A professional organization can help librarians stay current on important topics and it is a great place to network with other professionals.

Joining a staff association can also be a good opportunity to lift morale. By attending social events with co-workers, you become better acquainted with them which can make work more enjoyable.

SEEING THE BIG PICTURE

With many libraries going through financial struggles and having to keep up with the increasing needs of patrons, it is obvious that library staff morale is a "hot button" issue. Morale needs vary for each person and within each library. The subject of work morale is often discussed in the media, especially with the common occurrence of work layoffs and corporate downsizing. Libraries, too, need to address the issue of improving morale. We can start by finding a common purpose and working together toward that purpose. Managers can help boost morale by encouraging creative input which promotes staff ownership in the workplace. Making jobs more interesting by offering variety in tasks and responsibilities can also add a morale-boosting dimension to work. Encouraging staff to keep current on work-related issues and technology, as well as meeting with other library staff, can enhance staff self-confidence. Through participating in events that offer networking opportunities, encouraging initiative and creativity, and working towards a common purpose, we can keep the "Mondays" away. Keeping up morale is treating each other well and

wearing our “public service jerseys” as a team ready to be involved and not stuck on the sidelines.

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